

# The Afterlife of Catullus' Sirmio

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I have always agreed with T.S. Eliot that April is the cruellest month, at least in cold, rainy Britain. So last April I packed my bags and headed for Italy, where the spring climate is anything but cruel. My destination was the resort town of Sirmione (Roman Sirmio) on the shore of Lake Garda. I wasn't going to Sirmione just to sunbathe. I wanted to see the so-called *grotte di Catullo* ('grottoes of Catullus'), the ruins of a Roman villa that for centuries was thought to be the home of the poet Catullus.

On the bus to Sirmione from Verona, I consulted my *Let's Go* Italy guidebook. Immediately my hopes for a pleasant day-trip were quashed. According to the guidebook, 'Sirmione is a bit like Disneyland – flashy, expensive, and quickly exhausted.' I closed the book and sighed, but not without savouring the irony: this place, once the home of the urbane poet who adored all things witty (*lepidus*) and charming (*venustus*), was now a tacky tourist-trap.

But as I soon discovered, the people at *Let's Go* had got it wrong. The medieval town of Sirmione is situated near the end of a narrow peninsula, surrounded by Lake Garda on three sides. Almost everywhere I looked, I saw dazzlingly blue water. And although the town does have its fair share of overpriced pizzerias, it was not nearly so tacky or crowded as I had expected. After a five-minute walk past some hotels and the oldest church in Sirmione, I reached the verge of the peninsula and the site of the *grotte di Catullo*. This may be the exact spot where Catullus wrote his famous homecoming poem (31):

*Paene insularum, Sirmio, insularumque  
ocelle, quascumque in liquentibus stagnis  
marique vasto fert uterque Neptunus,  
quam te libenter quamque laetus inviso,  
vix mi ipse credens Thyniam atque Bithynos  
liquisse campos et videre te in tuto.  
o quid solutis est beatius curis,  
cum mens onus reponit ac peregrino  
labore fessi venimus Larem ad nostrum  
desideratoque acquiescimus lecto?  
hoc est quod unum est pro laboribus tantis.  
salve, o venusta Sirmio, atque ero gaude  
gaudente, vosque, o Lydiae lacus undae,  
ridete quidquid est domi cachinnorum.*

Catullus calls Sirmio the 'little eye' or 'jewel' (*ocelle*) of islands and 'almost-islands' (*paene insularum*). He greets the 'Lydian waves' (*Lydiae...undae*) of Lake Garda, and instructs them to 'laugh with all the laughter in the house' (*ridete quidquid est domi cachinnorum*). Still, although the poem is addressed to a specific place, it is not like most other landscape poems. Catullus does not describe the panoramic view from the end of the peninsula. He doesn't take note of the lofty mountains in the distance; he doesn't mention the wildflowers or the tiny salamanders that dart through the grass. Nor does he hint at the size or plan of his villa. Rather, Poem 31 is a highly subjective 'map' of Sirmione based on pride of possession. Catullus greets his *Lar*, the household god who connects him and his family to the villa they own. Hence the villa is more than a house: it is a *domus*, a family seat. Catullus' vantage point is enclosed, because he stands at the very centre of his map, inside his *domus* and next to his bed (*lectus*).

Poem 31 is a favourite of mine, but as I drank in the stunning view from the *grotte di Catullo*, I couldn't help but wonder: why wasn't Catullus moved to write about this extraordinary landscape? Has anyone else been moved to write about it? Perhaps

the first question is unanswerable. Luckily I found the answer to the second question when I sat down on a bench near the precipice. There was an engraved plaque on a pedestal just in front of me. It read:

OUR OLIVE SIRMIO  
LIES IN ITS BURNISHED MIRROR...

EZRA POUND  
1885 – 1972

Here was evidence of the literary afterlife of Catullus' Sirmio. When I returned to the UK, I did some research and discovered that the landscape of Sirmione was the inspiration for a good deal of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English poetry. In the middle of the nineteenth century more Britons were able to travel to Italy than ever before. Armed with their guidebooks, including the popular *Classical Tour Through Italy* by the Rev. J. C. Eustace, educated British tourists headed for Sirmione in order to inspect the former home of Catullus. By this time, however, historians had already cast doubt on the traditional identification of Sirmione's ruins; most British visitors to Sirmione did not actually believe that the *grotte di Catullo* were the ruins of Catullus' villa, but nevertheless they enjoyed the Catullan associations of the site. The Rev. J. C. Eustace himself claimed that the *grotte di Catullo* were 'of no very distant aera', but later he put aside his skepticism, recalling how he and his travelling companions had 'read Catullus on the ruins of his residence'. Visitors did not doubt that Catullus had lived at Sirmione, if not in the enormous Imperial villa that survives as the *grotte di Catullo*, then in an earlier, smaller villa on the same spot or nearby.

No poet, not even Catullus, has written about Sirmione so much (and so enthusiastically) as Ezra Pound. Pound was born in Idaho in the United States in 1885. In 1908 he moved to London, where he befriended artists and writers including Wyndham Lewis and W. B. Yeats. On his first trip to Sirmione in April 1910, Pound fell in love with the place, describing it as 'the same old Sirmio that Catullus raved over a few years back...'. Meanwhile he was falling in love with Dorothy Shakespeare, a London acquaintance who had travelled to Italy to visit him. During their time together at Sirmione, Ezra wrote a poem for Dorothy, entitled "'Blandula, Tenella, Vagula'":

*What hast thou, O my soul, with paradise?*

*Sirmio! Eyelet of islands and peninsulas, which each  
Neptune holds whether in limpid lakes or on the wide  
sea, how gladly and how happily do I see you again,  
scarcely believing that I've left behind Thynia and the  
Bithynian plains, and that I gaze on you safe and  
sound. O what greater blessing than cares released,  
when  
the mind casts down its burden, and when wearied with  
the toil of travel we reach our hearth, and rest in  
the longed-for bed. This and only this repays our  
numerous labours. Hail, lovely Sirmio, and rejoice in  
your  
master; and rejoice, you waves of the Lybian lake;  
laugh, you laughs echoing from my home.*

translated by Leonard C. Smithers

*Will we not rather, when our freedom's won,  
Get us to some clear place wherein the sun  
Lets drift in on us through the olive leaves  
A liquid glory? If at Sirmio,  
My soul, I meet thee, when this life's outrun,  
Will we not find some headland consecrated  
By aery apostles of terrene delight,  
Will not our cult be founded on the waves,  
Clear sapphire, cobalt, cyanine,  
On triune azures, the impalpable  
Mirrors unstill of the eternal change?*

*Soul, if She meet us there, will any rumour  
Of havens more high and courts desirable  
Lure us beyond the cloudy peak of Riva?*

The title of the poem echoes the beginning of Hadrian's deathbed address to his soul, *Animula vagula blandula* ('little soul wandering, coaxing'). Pound substitutes *tenella*, 'tender' or 'delicate', for Hadrian's word *animula*. Like Hadrian's poem, "Blandula, Tenella, Vagula" is an address to the poet's own soul. Pound wants to meet his soul after death ('when this life's outrun'), not in the Christian paradise, but in Sirmio, a kind of paradise on earth. It will truly be paradise if 'She', Dorothy, is there.

Pound does not allude to Catullus in "Blandula, Tenella, Vagula", or indeed in many of his poems set at Sirmione. A poet of the age before Pound's makes the connection between Sirmione and Catullus more explicit. Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892) visited Sirmione as an old man. Musing on the recent death of his brother Charles, and possibly also on the earlier death of his best friend Arthur Hallam, Tennyson composed "Frater Ave atque Vale":

*Row us out from Desenzano, to your Sirmione row!  
So they rowed, and there we landed – 'O venusta Sirmio!'  
There to me through all the groves of olive in the summer  
glow,  
There beneath the Roman ruin where the purple flowers  
grow,  
Came that 'Ave atque Vale' of the Poet's hopeless woe,  
Tenderest of Roman poets nineteen hundred years ago,  
'Frater Ave atque Vale' – as we wandered to and fro  
Gazing at the Lydian laughter of the Garda Lake below  
Sweet Catullus's all-but-island olive-silvery Sirmio!*

Tennyson, like Pound, pictures the olive groves of Sirmione bathed in sunlight (in Tennyson's words the sunlight is 'the summer glow'; in Pound's phrase it is 'A liquid glory'). Tennyson also mentions 'the purple flowers' growing around the ruins. But unlike Pound, he quotes Catullus' greeting *o venusta Sirmio*, and with the phrase 'Lydian laughter' he alludes to the end of Poem 31. Moreover he connects Poem 31 to Catullus' famous leave-taking of his brother, *frater ave atque vale* ('brother, hail and farewell'), from Poem 101. What Tennyson achieves is a two-fold expression of grief – coming from himself and Catullus. Their shared grief is counterbalanced by joy and the eternal laughter of the lake.

"Frater Ave atque Vale" is a poignant tribute to Catullus, whom Tennyson calls the 'Tenderest of Roman poets'. But today we see Catullus in a different light. We tend to think of him as a man of violent passions (*Odi et amo*, 'I hate and I love'), or as a witty satirist (*Nil nimium studeo, Caesar, tibi velle placere*, 'I don't care to please you, Caesar'). Tennyson's poem, and the dreamy, romantic tone of Pound's "Blandula, Tenella, Vagula", remind us that many readers used to form impressions of Catullus based on Poem 4 and/or Poem 31. Tennyson and Pound introduce us to an alternative Catullus, the tender Catullus of Sirmio. Besides, they attest to the beauty of the landscape of Sirmione, a beauty that even mass tourism has done little to diminish.

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